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ABSTRACT

This paper first considers the inadequacy of definitions of dialect speech that are too rigid. Some of the ways in which dialect can influence the performance of children in school are discussed, and the notion that dialect is an indication of linguistic deficit is also considered. In the last part of the paper, the attitude of the Schools Council Project toward West Indian children, speakers of an English-based Creole, and their dialect is summarized as follows: (1) Teachers must be as informed as possible about Creole and able to approach language learning problems from the child's point of view; (2) Many West Indian children have a range of severe language learning problems which have little to do with dialect per se. Most of the Project's teaching materials focus on these non-dialect and general language development areas; (3) One unit of the four that make up the Project materials does focus on dialect and is designed to help West Indian Children write standard English and to make teachers more aware of the learning problems of dialect speakers; and (4) The teacher must never attack the student's own language. A positive value should be placed on the dialect in class, and dialect differences must be considered objectively.
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DIALECT IN SCHOOL

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Terms of reference: Most of the observation, reading and discussion that has preceded this paper has been in the context of the particular educational needs of West Indian children in British schools. The home language of many West Indian children is an English based Creole. It is a question of debate whether Creole languages should be regarded as dialects or as languages in their own right. This is not the place to examine the arguments involved in that debate. In our work on the Project we have decided to regard these Creoles as dialects of English. This is because most of the children can with little conscious or systematic teaching modify their own language to the point where they achieve a classroom dialect that is relatively close to their teacher's standard. The point to remember is that most of the paper refers primarily to West Indian children and that many of these find themselves in an extreme dialect speech situation. The paper first of all considers the inadequacy of definitions of dialect speech which are too rigid. It then discusses some of the ways in which dialect can influence the performance of children in school. It goes on to consider the notion that dialect is an indication of linguistic deficit, and concludes by summarising the attitude of the Project towards dialect in the preparation of teaching materials.

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1 The Dialect Continuum

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When describing a non-standard dialect the usual procedure is to compare it with the standard language and then to list the points of difference. It is then stressed that these contrastive features are not mistakes, but the product of different sets of rules which operate in the dialect. This method of description is excellent for most purposes. However, if one wishes to study the way in which dialect interferes with the linguistic performance of a child in school the description must be less static.

It is necessary to remember, for example, that in Britain the dialect speaking child is rarely restricted to a single dialect with a rigid set of phonological and grammatical rules. Rather he starts at school to operate along a dialect continuum. In most cases this is one dimensional, with the home dialect at one end and the school dialect at the other. In the case of a Creole speaking child the contrast between his home dialect and the immediate neighbourhood dialect introduces a second dimension which seems to increase the child's linguistic flexibility and sensitivity to varieties of lexis, phonology and syntax. It is difficult otherwise to account for the speed and skill with which many West Indian children acquire a more standard dialect for formal situations like school.

In addition to the differences in the child's speech brought about by different social contexts, a closer examination of quite short stretches of dialect speech shows that some of the 'rules' fluctuate in strength. Labov (1967) has shown that many of the distinctive features of negro dialect are not invariable, that it is possible to measure their prevalence and to describe certain contextual conditions that influence the choices made (automatically) by the speaker. It is, for example, a feature of various Negro dialects (and of many West Indian Creoles) that certain final consonant clusters are reduced. Labov showed that the amount of final /t/,/d/ reduction (67%) is not much greater than is the case with the white speakers (57%), while the /s/,/z/ reduction is more distinctive of Negro dialect (50%: 14%).

To take another example, it is a 'rule' in Jamaican Creole not to mark the simple past tense by inflection. Consider, however, the following example of Jamaican Creole quoted by Cassidy (1967). It is part of a story told by a cane-field labourer near Morant Bay in Jamaica:

'Nou, (Breda Anansi), pik up iz myuuzik man, wich iz tree kakruoch, dat i tuk intu a guodi, an wen ing riich about a aaf mailz, tu di King giet, im straik up di myuuzik man.'

A standard translation would be:

'Now (Brother Anancy)picked up his music men, who were three cock-roaches, that he took in a gourd, and when he reached about half a mile from the King's gate he struck up the music men.'

In the original Jamaican Creole, four of the verbs (pick,is, reach and strike) are not inflected, though one verb (took) is inflected. This ratio of uninflected to inflected past verbs (4:I) is maintained throughout the story. In the children's school dialect the proportion of inflected past forms increases considerably. The following is a part of a discussion about the merits of air travel between a teacher and three twelve year olds recently arrived from Jamaica:

Glenville: I never like the food, not all of it, only liked the spaghetti I did.

Pauline: I never eat any spaghetti.

Sylvester: I only drink the water.

Glenville: I drink the orange and the tea.

Pauline: We went to sleep on the plane and I first wake up and saw the telly was on.

Glenville: I only went to sleep once I did.

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2. Performance in School

It is not easy to summarise the position of the Creole speaking child at school, but certain generalisations can be made:

1. He will soon speak at least two dialects.
2. The formal school dialect will contain certain Creole features, but it will be intelligible to non-Creole speakers. (Spoken Creoles can be entirely unintelligible to outsiders).
3. In spite of this facility with the school dialect, Creole is the child's first language. At various points in his school career this Creole background places the child at a considerable disadvantage.

Attitudes vary about the role of dialect in school. Attitudes are also changing. Tolerance is on the increase. Correctness (i.e. conformity to standard rules) is less important in the hierarchy of English teaching objectives. There is a growing awareness that there are other criteria for judging 'good English', and that at certain stages in the child's education these criteria outweigh the value of insisting on standard spelling, standard grammar etc.

However, the instinctive reaction of most teachers to such features as a double negative is still 'it's wrong', rather than 'it is not standard, but very common in various regional and social dialects'. It is difficult to know exactly what effect it has on young children to hear their own language, the language of their parents, described as wrong. In the case of a child for whom school represents a fair amount of failure in other respects this extra hurdle will certainly hinder his general school performance and may have much more serious psychological implications. A child's own language is a very personal possession.

a. Production - the written language

The two most obvious areas of dialect interference are seen in the children's writing. It will affect the spelling and the syntax. Any child learning to read and write comes face to face with the fact that the standard written language

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and his own spoken language do not match each other very well. At the age of six the Jamaican Creole equivalent of the notorious 'The cat sat on the mat.' would be /dikyatsitpandimat/. It is written out withoutspaces between the words. This is because a five year old child cannot automatically and easily analyse and sequence the units of his spoken sentences in the manner required for writing. Mackay and Thompson (1968) report that the lexical items (words with high information content) are easily recognised and handled, but that there is some doubt in the child's mind about the status of the grammatical elements in the sentence. This is true for children whose spoken language corresponds fairly closely in syntax and lexis to standard English. For a 5 year old Creole speaker the intellectual problems of analysis and matching are much greater. In addition to analysing his spoken language into the appropriate sequence of units for writing, the dialect speaker has to fit the sounds of his spoken words to the written symbols. Teachers report that West Indian children who make reasonable progress learning to recognise whole words sometimes fail badly at phonic word building. This is hardly surprising when even the spelling rules which convert received pronunciation speech into writing would not win prizes for simplicity or logical consistency. But at least with that rule system the teacher can appreciate the ambiguities and make allowances for them.

To return to the Creole sentence above, the three words 'cat', 'sat' and 'mat' each have different sounds, /ya/,/i/and/a/, which must all be represented by the letter 'a' in the written sentence. It takes considerable time and sensitivity for a teacher without special training to make allowances for ambiguities of that sort even assuming that her analysis does not stop at a judgment of 'wrong pronunciation'.

b. Reception - the spoken language

As mentioned above the dialect speaking child's approach to written English quickly reveals some of the more obvious problems. It is more difficult to assess the submerged difficulties that the children experience in their oral language transactions in the classroom. In the infant school the Creole speaking child is sometimes unintelligible. Differences of syntax and pronunciation will make a simple sentence hard for the teacher to understand. Unusual intonation and stress and a couple of unfamiliar lexical items will make the same sentence completely unintelligible. The most difficult question to answer, though, is how much the child understands the teacher.

Speaking to a group of children, a teacher can see if they are all listening. She cannot necessarily tell if they are all fully understanding. When a child fails to respond in the expected way to a question or an instruction, she can only guess at the reason. It might be the result of poor concentration, a short memory span, or limited experience. It might be a question of the child's confidence or intelligence. All these reasons are likely to suggest themselves before the possiblility of dialect interference is considered. Yet if the teacher, a skilful listener with vocabulary and experience far greater than the child's sometimes fails to understand the child's dialect, the odds are that that child in an infant school frequently fails to understand the teacher.

Until some delicate testing procedure is available to measure the extent to which dialect interference is a factor in comprehension failure in young children, it is only possible to guess at the disadvantages of the Creole speaking child in the infant school. It should be mentioned, though, that Keislar and Stern (1968) investigated the hypothesis that Head Start children who receive instruction in a familiar dialect will learn more than a comparable group who receive the same instruction in Standard English. Their results gave no support at all to this hypothesis. In fact the groups instructed in Standard English achieved better results!

Whatever the actual situation is for the Jamaican Creole speaker in the infant class, it is certainly true that most suppositions made by linguists about the situation need testing before they can be confidently accepted. If however it is accepted that a Creole speaking background is likely to decrease the child's understanding in the infant school, there is some evidence that as the child grows older it becomes a less critical factor.

It is a truism that a child's ability to understand language exceeds his ability to produce it. This being so, the child's development of a more standard dialect for school use is likely to indicate an ability to understand dialects which are closer still to the standard.

The research (Wight and Norris 1970) that preceded the Project's present development of teaching materials also suggested that where West Indian children do have difficulty in oral comprehension - Creole interference is not the principal cause. In this research phase a test was developed to examine the effect of Creole interference in situations where the teacher is talking to the whole class. The test was given to eight junior school classes in the 7-9 age range. It contained 50 items, 25 of which were designed to present special difficulty to Creole speakers. The other (control) items were designed to be of equal difficulty to both speakers of Creole and of Birmingham dialects. The special West Indian items focused on grammatical and phonological points of difference between Jamaican Creole and Standard English.

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In Jamaican Creole, for example, the standard rules of subject verb agreement do not apply and there is a tendency not to mark noun plurals with the morpheme 's'. A sentence which begins 'When the horse comes back ....' contains two grammatical clues for most English speakers that only one horse is likely to come back. It was assumed that for Jamaican Creole speakers these clues would be obscured. Therefore clauses like this were embedded in short stretches of narrative and the children asked to answer such questions as: 'How many horses were expected back?' The assumption was the West Indian children would find particular difficulty with items of this sort because of dialect interference. In fact the results obtained were far from those expected. By and large the West Indian children (both those born in England and those recently arrived from the Caribbean) scored significantly lower on all the items. There was little evidence that the special West Indian items were creating relatively more difficulty than the control items. There was an exception to this. Children recently arrived from the Caribbean did have more difficulty with those items based on Creole pronunciation.

This test result suggested that Creole interference was not the principal cause of the children's comprehension failure. A small scale experiment carried out the year before also supported this view. In this experiment a number of 12 year old West Indians who had been in England a relatively short while played a word association game. The teacher said a word and the children responded by writing down the first word that came into their minds. Many of the words were potentially ambiguous to the children because of differences in Creole pronunciation. By examining the children's responses it was possible to see which word the children had 'heard'. For example, a Creole speaker will pronounce the number 3-/tree/. If the stimulus word therefore was 'tree', the response 'leaves' or'wood', might be expected, but a response of 'four' or 'number', etc., would indicate Creole interference. Only 6% of the children's answers to potentially ambiguous stimulus words showed evidence of dialect

interference. A number of the children who played this word association game spoke quite broad Creole themselves, yet they were able to adjust to the pronunciation of English teacher so well that with impressive consistency they could interpret the teacher's words without the help of any context. This was a small scale experiment, but it suggests very sophisticated skills on the part of these children as they adjusted to a system of pronunciation quite different from their own.

The tentative conclusion to be drawn from all this is that although dialect will continue to have a marked influence on the child's language production, he will, provided he has reasonable exposure to the dialect of the teacher and the school, develop skills of language reception to cope with the contrasts between Creole and Standard English. This is not to say that there are not difficulties of comprehension for these older children, but it is likely that for them the principal sources of difficulty lie elsewhere. If there is dialect interference it operates like a filter on the communication channel when there are other non-dialect reasons which already make the communication difficult - such as the speed, or the intellectual complexity of the teacher's language, the novelty of the subject matter, etc.

3. Dialect Difference and Linguistic Deficit

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It is obvious that Jamaican Creole affects the child's ability to produce Standard English. There is though a much more fundamental consideration. Do the formal characteristics of a dialect - its lexis, phonology and especially its syntax have an effect on the child's ability to use language efficiently (as opposed to respectably)? Does a non-standard dialect automatically indicate linguistic deficit?

Now is not the time to examine the problems involved in defining or measuring linguistic deficit. It is assumed for the moment, that tests of verbal ability do measure important aspects of linguistic proficiency. On these tests middle class children tend to score higher than working class children. Also it does not need to be argued that middle class speech is likely to be more standard than that of working class children. Both these propositions may be true, but it needs to be demonstrated that there is a causal relationship between them.

There is moreover a very important point to remember. Some tests of language development examine the ability of children to produce Standard English. Berko's ingenious test examines, for example, the children's ability with the plural 's' morpheme. The Illinois test of psycholinguistic abilities also contains a section in which success depends on the mastery of Standard English grammatical rules. A verbally gifted Creole speaker might fail in sections of tests of this kind, but it would be a demonstration of linguistic difference not deficit.

In other words the conclusion that dialects are responsible for language deficit is sometimes the product of a circular argument which first defines linguistic competence in Standard English terms and then proves that dialect speakers are incompetent.

Baratz (1968) conducted an interesting experiment which makes this point perfectly. She constructed a sentence repetition test that contained 30 sentences - fifteen of these sentences were in standard English.

e.g. When the teacher asked if he had done his homework, Henry said, 'I didn't do it'.

The other fifteen sentences were in Negro non-standard:

e.g. When the teacher aks Henry did he do his homework, Henry say I ain did it.

The subjects of the experiment were drawn from a Washington Inner City Negro school and a suburban white school. The white subjects were significantly better than the Negro subjects at repeating the Standard English, but the Negro subjects were significantly better at repeating the Negro non-standard.

There is an expansion of the earlier simple question which deserves more serious examination. Is a non-standard dialect intrinsically a restricted type of language which therefore limits certain types of communication and retards the development of certain conceptual skills? A typical argument runs as follows:

(a) Jamaican Creole does not regularly indicate past tense.

(b) Jamaican Creole does not have the same number of tenses as English.

(c) Therefore, Jamaican Creole speakers have a restricted general concept of time.

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This type of argument is difficulty to answer conclusively. It implies that a Greek soldier doing his national service round the walls of Troy had a much more elaborated concept of time than we do simply because at first sight Homeric Greek has a much more complex tense system than standard English. Moreover there are areas where Jamaican Creole syntax makes more delicate distinctions than standard English. Is it the case that in these areas a standard English speaker has restricted concepts? For example, Bailey (1964) has shown that the sentence pattern subject + verb 'to be' + complement breaks down into three different sentence patterns in Jamaican Creole.

(a) When the predicate is an adjective there is no copula: di biebi ogli 'The baby is ugly'

(b) When the predicate is a noun the copula is a di biebi a gyal 'The baby is a girl'

(c) When the predicate is a locative phrase the copula is de di biebi de anda di tree. 'The baby is under the tree'.

Can one conclude from this that Standard English speakers have a restricted general concept of predication?

4. Familiarity and Functional Efficiency

Other evidence about the restrictive nature of dialect is sometimes drawn from the comparative studies of children's language. These studies take as a measure of linguistic skill the amount of complexity and variety in the children's language. A measure might be the proportion of subordinate clauses or adverbial phrases - the variety of vocabulary - even the proportion of sentences which lack a main verb.

In an interesting short study of this sort Mordecai (1966) divided West Indian children into three groups according to the length of their stay in England. In one of the sub-tests the children were asked to describe to the tester a series of pictures - the subjects of which were chosen carefully to avoid cultural bias against the most recent arrivals. The success of each child was measured by giving a score to the most complex sentence in each description. During the early stages of the Project a similar method of collecting children's language was employed. The tentativeness of the language and the lack of fluency was quite marked.

The most fluent descriptions were made by a very articulate self confident 12 year old girl:

> This is a child's lady ... nurse. She's in the hospital dressing ... cleaning out a little baby's hairs and he's got a wound on his forehead. And there is his shirt lift up and you can see his pure tummy. And her hands is betwixt the cot bars. This is a chinese lady. She's looking after the baby. She's a nurse and she has got on a watch and a nurse cap and a nurse dress. There is a saucepan there as well.

When the same children were asked to improvise a scene depicting the situation at home the morning after an imaginary robber, this girl slipped easily into the role of the bossy mother:

> Look! There is footprints on the windowsill. It seems like we have got burglars here last night! Shall we look see if we lost our money? Look! There ain't any money in the drawer. Let's call the police!
> Hello is that BAR 999?
> Yes, this is BAR 999, can I help you please.
> O yes you can. It seems like we have got burglars here last night, because they have thief all of the money we have got in our drawer and then we have seen their footprints on the windowsill.

The contrast between these two stretches of language is obvious. There is a great deal more subordination and complexity in the second sequence. Although one hopes that robbers were not regular occurrences in her home - the language of the home and her mother's role were both familiar - and so fluent, complex, if not entirely standard language was the result. Describing a picture was on the other hand an unfamiliar task, even though she knew a fair amount about hospitals - from her mother who was a nurse. The result was a series of shorter less complex sentences.

Many studies which attempt to measure the development of children's language skills by examining factors like complexity run into this difficulty of creating a familiar context where the subjects can display a reasonable range of the resources available to them.

In observing children using the Project's pilot materials it appears that dialect itself very rarely effects the functional efficiency of their language production, unless part of the child's task is actually to produce standard English. In a situation, for example, which calls for enquiry, the children rarely fail because of ignorance of the Standard auxiliary inversion rules or the appropriate intonation patterns. They do fail frequently because of difficulty in processing adequately the answers they receive - or because they are unaware of the power and relevance of certain lines of enquiry. This distinction between the form and the functional efficiency of children's language is discussed more fully elsewhere (Wight, 1971), but it is one of the reasons why only about a quarter of the Project's teaching materials focus on problems created for West Indian children by Creole.

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5. Some Conclusions

The Project's attitude towards West Indian children and their dialect can be summarised simply:

(1) The most important factor for a Creole speaking child is probably the attitude of the teacher and the school. Teachers need to be as informed as possible about Creole and able to approach the children's language learning problems from the child's point of view.

(2) Many West Indian children do have a range of severe language learning problems which have little to do with dialect per se. These are problems shared by many English children. The bulk of the Project's teaching materials focus on these non-dialect and general language development areas, and are not exclusively for West Indian children.

(3) One unit of the four which make up the materials does focus on dialect. Its aims are twofold. It is designed to help West Indian children write Standard English focusing on certain areas where there is persistent dialect interference. Its second, less publicised intention is to bring to the notice of the teacher many of the issues discussed in this paper.

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Even with this fairly restricted aim we have been conscious of the danger of appearing to attack the child's own language. We hope to avoid this by presenting the Standard English structures which are to be taught, in the context of the conventions of the written language, emphasing that nobody writes in exactly the same way as they speak.

The most effective way to guard against attacking the dialect is simply to place a positive value on it in class. Dialect differences can be considered objectively and older children can be encouraged sometimes to explore their own dialect and write in the style and manner of their culture. A teaching experiment (Muehl 1970) with groups of Negro teenagers asked them to do a 'cooltalk' translation of the story of Faust. Quite apart from helping the students actually to enjoy a visit to Gounod's opera, the results are woth reading in their own right. The following is a version of Act 1, the syntax of which has been standardised a bit, one suspects, by their teacher.

> This old dried up cat named Fred was sittin down at the table one night, trying to dig on his philosophy. The folks outside were buggin his case, cause he was thinkin about goin sidewise. They kept on buggin his high. And then comes this cat, this cat from below the world, his main walk boy Satan. This cat put down the rap on him. 'I know all your git up and go has got up and went, but drink this juice man. Put glide in your stride, cut in your strut, and fill the hole in your soul! Make everything want to be mellow. Like look, Jack, drink this taste, and everything will be all right. We'll let you play the Sidney Poitier role.' So the dude turns around and what does he see but this babe standin there as cool as can be. So Fred agrees to turn in hisself to the happy huntin grounds, and give his soul to the man.

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